

# Becoming local: exploring adolescents' sociolinguistic limits and potential<sup>1</sup>

Miriam Meyerhoff<sup>a</sup>, Erik Schlee<sup>b</sup> & Lynn Clark<sup>a</sup>

University of Edinburgh<sup>a</sup>, University of Manchester<sup>b</sup>

[mhoff@ling.ed.ac.uk](mailto:mhoff@ling.ed.ac.uk)

[erik.schleef@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:erik.schleef@manchester.ac.uk)

[lynn@ling.ed.ac.uk](mailto:lynn@ling.ed.ac.uk)

## Introduction

Since 2004, Britain has witnessed the “largest single wave of in-migration that the British Isles have ever experienced” (Salt and Millar 2006: 335). Polish workers and their families accounted for 64.4% of immigration from the “new” (A8) EU nations to the UK in 2004. We report initial findings from a research project investigating the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation in English by adolescent Polish immigrants living in Edinburgh. We question to what extent Polish adolescent immigrants are acquiring the variable grammar of their local peer group. To do this, we examine the speech of some Polish adolescents living in Edinburgh and compare their use of the (ing) variable with that of Edinburgh-born adolescents. Our findings suggest that Polish adolescent migrants are acquiring both ‘local’ Edinburgh constraints on (ing) variation and ‘supra-local’ constraints found to operate on (ing) in other varieties of British English and American English. We exemplify this with the pattern of grammaticality constraints operating on (ing) for these teenagers.

## Methods

### Data collection

Fieldwork on this project took place at a high school in Edinburgh. Linguistic production data were collected from 16 Polish migrants living in Edinburgh. Linguistic data were also collected from 16 Edinburgh-born teenagers attending the same school as the Polish adolescents to provide a benchmark for the types of ‘Edinburgh English’ to which these Polish adolescents are regularly exposed. Sociolinguistic interviews were carried out between all participants and the third named author, a female researcher from Edinburgh. Speakers were also recorded performing a short reading task of 17 sentences that was

designed to elicit a wide range of different phonological variables. The conversation and reading-task data were transcribed orthographically using ELAN (<http://www.lat-mpi.eu/tools/elan/>), resulting in a time-aligned corpus of around 100,000 words.

## Analysis

As a first step in our analysis, we explored the variable realisation of (ing) (with variation between [Iv] and [IN] in unstressed syllables) in this corpus. We extracted all tokens of (ing) from the conversation and reading passage data (1388 tokens) and coded these data for a range of different social and linguistic constraints often found to operate on (ing) variation in English<sup>2</sup>. We then subjected the data to a multivariate analysis to determine which social and linguistic factors constrain the realisation of (ing) among each of the two speaker groups in Edinburgh<sup>3</sup>.

## Results

Our results suggest that certain constraints on (ing) appear to have been adopted wholesale from the local peer group by the Polish adolescents, some have been adopted but do not exactly mirror the local peer-group pattern and some constraints operating on (ing) for the Polish adolescents are entirely different to those found among the local adolescent peer group. However, the most common pattern is of ‘transformation’ of constraints among the L2 learners. The Polish adolescents typically either produce a different version of the native-speakers’ variable grammar by re-ordering the internal hierarchy of existing constraints or they adopt new constraints on (ing) which are not apparent in (or not relevant to) the UK-born adolescents<sup>4</sup>.

An interesting example of this emerges with respect to the treatment of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Predictor variables included preceding and following phonological context, grammatical category of the lexical item, number of syllables in the word, previous realisation of the (ing) variable, lexical frequency, speech style, sex of speaker and the speakers’ attitude towards the local Edinburgh accent (see Schlee, Clark & Meyerhoff (in prep) for further details).

<sup>3</sup> Rbrul (Johnson 2008) was used to run a mixed-effect multiple regression analysis in which the individual speaker was also included as a random effect. Full details of this regression can be found in Schlee, Clark & Meyerhoff (in prep).

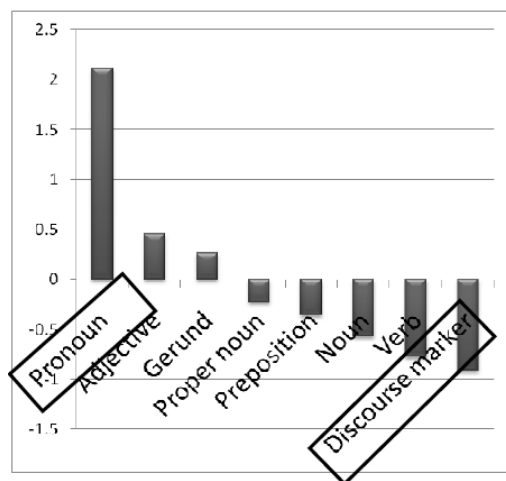
<sup>4</sup> A detailed discussion of this point can be found in Schlee, Clark & Meyerhoff (in prep).

---

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank the ESRC for funding this research (RES-000-22-3244).

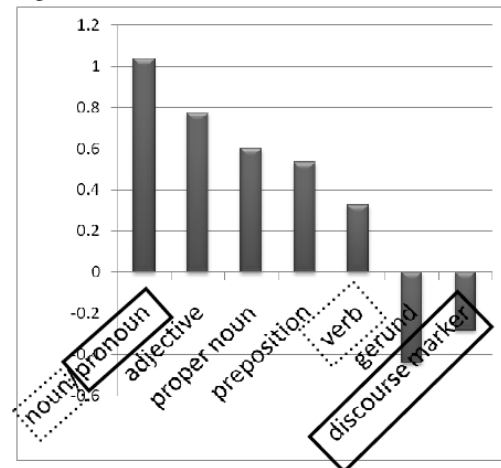
grammatical category constraint among these two groups of Edinburgh-based speakers. The most consistently demonstrated linguistic constraint on (ing) in English is that it is often subject to a type of grammatical conditioning that Labov labels the ‘nominal-verbal continuum’ (2001: 88). Put simply, verbs favour apical realisation of (ing), nouns favour velar realisations of (ing) and gerunds (which have properties of both nouns and verbs) fall somewhere between these two extremes. For Edinburgh-born adolescents, there is no evidence of a nominal-verbal continuum; among the Edinburgh-born adolescents, however, a very clear pattern emerges with respect to the *-thing* compounds (*something, everything, anything, nothing*): *-thing* compounds which behave as pronouns (e.g. ‘I don’t know *anything* about it’) favour the velar variant and *-thing* compounds which behave as discourse particles (e.g. ‘I don’t know about it, or *anything*’) favour the apical form. Polish adolescents living in Edinburgh seem to have acquired this local constraint. However, (ing) variation among Polish adolescents in Edinburgh also seems to be influenced by a nominal-verbal constraint. This pattern becomes particularly apparent when we chart the log-odds from the regression analysis for each of the speaker groups (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1



Grammatical conditioning of (ing) among Edinburgh-born adolescents. Regression log-odds plotted against grammatical category

Figure 2:



Grammatical conditioning of (ing) among Polish-born adolescents living in Edinburgh. Regression log-odds plotted against grammatical category

For Polish adolescents living in Edinburgh, the *-thing* compounds behave very differently depending on whether they are used as pronouns or discourse markers (highlighted in solid rectangular blocks in Figure 1 for the Edinburgh-born adolescents and in Figure 2 for the Polish-born adolescents). This can be taken as evidence for the acquisition of a local grammatical constraint on (ing). However, among Polish adolescents living in Edinburgh, nouns favour a velar variant of (ing) more than verbs and gerunds (highlighted in dashed rectangular blocks in Figure 2). It is not clear where the input for this nominal-verbal pattern has come from among the Polish adolescents (possibilities include previous exposure to an British-based system of English in Poland, exposure to other varieties of English in the wider community and the media, or exposure to teachers using Scottish Standard English in Edinburgh) but its existence among the Polish adolescents living in Edinburgh can be taken as evidence of the acquisition of a ‘supra-local’ constraint on (ing) because this is the pattern most often associated with English. In other words, Polish adolescents in Edinburgh seem to be employing both the ‘local’ and the ‘supra-local’ constraints on (ing) with respect to grammatical category.

## Summary and conclusions

Our findings are in line with other research on the sociolinguistics of second language acquisition: Polish adolescents learning English in Edinburgh have acquired only “partial mastery of the constraints on variation observed by L1 speakers” (Uritescu et al. 2004: 354). However, in the case of the grammatical category constraint, this depends

on the definition of 'L1 speakers' because Polish adolescents display patterns of variation that are typical of both local L1 speakers in Edinburgh and other L1 speakers of 'British English' or 'American English'. This in itself is an interesting finding and one which requires further investigation. However, we must also bear in mind as we interpret this result that "sociolinguistic competence cannot be understood in terms of a single variable" (Howard et al 2006); a fuller linguistic analysis dealing with variation from different levels of the grammar is necessarily our next step.

## References

- Howard, Martin., Memee, Isabelle., & Regan, Vera.** 2006. The L2 acquisition of a phonological variable: the case of /l/ deletion in French. *French Language Studies*, 16, 1-24.
- Johnson, Daniel Ezra.** 2008. Getting off the GoldVarb Standard: Introducing Rbrul for Mixed-Effects Variable Rule Analysis. *Language and Linguistic Compass*, 3(1): 359-383.
- Labov, William.** 2001. *Principles of language change: social factors*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell.
- Meyerhoff, Miriam.** 2009. Replication, transfer and calquing: using variation as a tool in the study of language contact. *Language Variation and Change* 21 (3).
- Salt, John., Miller, Jane.** 2006. Foreign labour in the United Kingdom: current patterns and trends. In *Office of National Statistics: labour market trends* (Ed.) (pp. 335-355).
- Schleef, Erik., Clark, Lynn., Meyerhoff, Miriam.** in prep. Sociolinguistics and immigration: linguistic variation among Polish-born and UK-born adolescents.
- Uritescu, Dorin., Mougeon, Raymond., Rehner, Katherine & Nadasdi, Terry.** 2004. Acquisition of the internal and external constraints of variable schwa deletion by French immersion students. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 42, 349-364.